

Research on Chinese traditional leisure culture centered on tea fragrance of literati in Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Abstract: This study investigates the complicated relationship between tea and incense culture among the literati during the Ming and Qing dynasties in China. The primary objective is to explore how these practices were not just for sensory enjoyment but served as mediums for introspection, social interaction, and connection to nature. By analysing historical texts, artistic representations, and cultural artefacts, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the aesthetic and philosophical values associated with tea and incense. The discoveries reveal that tea and incense were essential to the daily lives of the literati, reflecting a sophisticated lifestyle that emphasized tranquillity, beauty, and intellectual engagement. The literati's thorough care given to the preparation and appreciation of tea and incense is highlighted, underscoring their role in fostering a serene and contemplative environment. Additionally, the study identifies a continuity and adaptation of these cultural practices from the Ming to the Qing dynasty, illustrating their lasting impact on Chinese cultural heritage.

Keywords: Tea; Incense; Cultural Studies; Chinese History

1. Introduction

In the Ming Dynasty, Xu Bo expressed the idea in his *On Tea*: “Tea Appreciation is a most refined affair, but without qualified incense burning in the brazier, it lacks a certain serene charm. Similarly, burning incense is a most elegant matter, but without premium tea floating in the bowl, it loses a special delight. Therefore, tea and incense complement each other and both are indispensable. How many people can truly enjoy such a pure pleasure?”

Leaving aside the red tape, it is a leisure pursuit to appreciate tea with friends, savour tea alone, or explore delight in shared tea tasting. Let the infusion leave fragrance on the palate, relax the mind in the steam, enjoy the aroma of the tea, and experience the clarity and ethereal nature of the natural world to purify the spirit. The appreciation of incense involves observing its form and inhaling its fragrance. In the process, it is pleasurable to watch the smoke gather and disperse, open and close. When still, the smoke looks like mountains; when in motion, it resembles flowing clouds.

The culture of tea and incense played a significant role in the daily lives and leisure activities of the literati during the Ming and Qing dynasties in China. These practices were not merely about consumption but were deeply connected with the aesthetic and philosophical pursuits of the time.

The Ming Dynasty marked a period of great cultural flourishing, where tea and incense were integral to the leisurely pursuits of the educated elite. These cultural practices were not only for sensory enjoyment but also served as a means to foster introspection, social interaction, and a connection to nature. The meticulous care given to the preparation and appreciation of tea and incense reflects the aesthetic principles and sophisticated lifestyle of the time.

The Qing Dynasty continued to embrace these cultural practices, emphasizing the harmonious integration of daily life and artistic pursuits. The refined sensibilities and practical creativity of the time are evident in the use of tea and incense to transform spaces and enhance the tea-drinking experience. The importance of space and setting in tea culture is also underscored, as creating an environment that fosters calmness and introspection was essential to the appreciation of tea.^[1]

In recent years, global scholars have conducted extensive research on the culture of tea and incense during the Ming and Qing dynasties. These studies have explored various aspects, including the historical development, cultural significance, and aesthetic values associated with tea and incense. This

growing body of research highlights the enduring influence of these practices and their relevance to understanding the cultural heritage of China.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the development and transformation of tea and incense culture. Gegao explores the origin and development of Chinese tea culture, highlighting its aesthetic characteristics of nature, pleasure, and harmony under the influence of Confucianism. Tan Chee-Beng and Ding Yuling analyze the promotion and consumption of tea in South China, highlighting the re-invention of tea traditions in contemporary Quanzhou driven by economic and social changes. Scott Habkirk and Hsun Chang explore the religious uses of incense in traditional Chinese religion, emphasizing its role in connecting the spiritual and material worlds. Ray Qu's anthropological study on hope in North China's Xia County also touches upon the spiritual and relational aspects of incense use in maintaining community and personal well-being.^[2]

However, the existing studies specifically focusing on the tea and incense culture of the Ming and Qing dynasties remain relatively sparse. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a comprehensive examination of these cultural practices during these significant historical periods.

2. Connoisseurs and Enthusiasts

Pleasant Diversions, *Eight Types of Notes on Cherishing Life* *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment*, and other theories of elegant life constitute a splendid landscape of lifestyles in the Ming and Qing dynasties. These records of the most leisurely and luxurious Chinese pastimes advocate cultivating a sense of beauty from the subtleties of everything and finding pleasure in the smallest details of life.

The uses of incense and tea are extensive. For those secluded from the ordinary world, the two items would refresh their minds during the discussion on moral principles. For those rising in the gentle morning sun, they would inspire spirits. For those sitting by a window, reclining on a couch, and reading under the lamplight at night, these can ward off drowsiness. For those whispering intimate secrets with well-dressed companions, these can kindle passion and warmth. For those sitting by the window during a rainy day or taking a stroll after a meal, these can dispel loneliness and worries. For sober guests chatting at night by the window after a banquet, chanting aloud in an empty building, or playing the strings of a cold zither, these can enhance the joy and quench thirst. —*Treatise on Superfluous Things: Incense and Tea*.^[3]

2.1 Aesthetics of Life of the “Tall, Rich, and Handsome” in the Late Ming Dynasty

The late Ming was a time of great talent. Countless masters of painting grew in the era, including Tang Yin, Qiu Ying, and Wen Zhengming, Wen Zhenheng's great-grandfather, as well as Chen Jiru, who was born in the same year as him, and Chen Hongshou, who was a few years behind him, to name but a few.

Wen Zhenheng to the people at that time was probably equal to what we now call “Tall, Rich, and Handsome”: the person with noble lineage, abundant talent, and possessing “a tall and elegant stature with a charming demeanour”. It was such background and grace that enabled him to write the book *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, which was “the Late Ming aesthetic guide to life” involving all kinds of elegant plants and animals, as well as utensils.

In a small room near the mountain studio, it is necessary to arrange tea utensils and require a young servant to specialise in tea preparation for a long-time leisurely conversation and meditation on solitary nights. For a recluse, it is a primary duty that must not be ignored. —*Treatise on Superfluous Things: Room*.^[4]

Ming people's concern for space was also a concern for their destiny. The space was neither the imperial court nor the secular town. Recluses often used the planning of space to express their emotions and expectations about life. It has become the place of certain aesthetic activities and formed a specific culture.

In the first volume titled “Room” of *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, the texts about the tea house briefly described the construction of the place to cook tea. The author proposed two points: one was the location should be adjacent to the mountain lounge; the other was there must be a person focusing on cooking tea. The formal point was because the tea was used to not only clear out annoyance and quench thirst but also show elegant qualities and indifferent character. The mountain room was quiet

and cosy, which was a good place to appreciate tea with friends. The latter was caused by the demands to impact the daily chatting conversation and the night sitting.

The “Picture of Tea Appreciation” painted by Wen Zhengming shows that on the right side of the painting lies a tea house and a child is stirring the fire to boil water for preparing tea. Ancient Chinese enjoyed tea through the methods of boiling, frying, baking, and brewing. The brewing of tea prevailed in the middle of the Ming Dynasty. In the painting, a pot and two cups on the table exactly symbolise the teapot to brew tea and the tradition of separate drinking.

In the early Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang issued an edict in the 24th year of Hongwu to abolish compressed tea and adopt loose tea. The formations of tea utensils also become simple and convenient, emphasising the natural pleasures of drinking tea. The most prominent feature was the emergence of small teapots, and the second feature was the change of the tea cups.^[5]

Tea enthusiasts in the Ming Dynasty most revered purple sand or porcelain small teapots. Treatise on Superfluous Things mentioned, “A teapot made of clay is the best choice, as it neither robs the tea of its fragrance nor carries any stale taste.” *Tea Classics* by Zhang Qiande said, “Tea has a concentrated fragrance. If the teapot is too large, the fragrance will not gather. A teapot with a capacity of 50-100 ml is sufficient.”

In the Ming Dynasty, tea cups were still made of porcelain. Due to changes in the types of tea, the tea competition prevailing in the Song Dynasty began to decline. The tea cups used at this time had changed from the black-glazed cups or bowls of the Song Dynasty to white porcelain or blue-and-white porcelain tea cups. White porcelain in the Ming Dynasty has a high artistic value, known as “sweet white”. Tea cups made of such materials are aesthetically pleasing, with well-proportioned shapes and refined, elegant materials. They hold an important position in the history of teaware development.

The preferences of people in the Ming Dynasty are different from the past. The method of preparing and tasting tea was also different, which was exceptionally simple and thoroughly natural to enjoy the true flavour of tea. —*Treatise on Superfluous Things*

There were two methods of tea drinking in the Ming Dynasty. One method was to boil strip-shaped tea leaves in a porcelain pot and decoct them until the proper temperature was reached, then pour the tea water into cups for drinking. The other one called “Cuo Pao” was to directly pour hot water into a cup containing tea leaves. Either method of brewing tea was much simpler than those of the previous dynasties and restored the natural essence of the tea leaves.

Made of purple sand, it is crafted into a bowl shape with two layers. The bottom of the upper layer has holes for washing tea, allowing impurities to flow out through the holes, which was convenient. —*Treatise on Superfluous Things*.^[6]

The term “washing tea” initially appeared in the Ming Dynasty. Gu Yuanqing’s *Tea Phylogeny* in this dynasty recorded “four principles of tea decoction”, one of which was “washing tea” before drinking and pouring hot water to clean tea leaves. Its purpose was to remove “dust” and the “Cold Qi”. The former refers to washing away dust and impurities mixed with the tea, while the latter refers to rinsing off the dampness absorbed by the tea.

2.2 Leisurely Sentiments in the Jiezi Garden

Three hundred years ago, in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, although the term “mild life” had not yet been created, the scholar Li Yu from Lanxi kept a distance from worldly fame and devoted himself to a life of liberty, leisure, and elegance in his self-renovated Jiezi Garden. He spent many years exploring planting, food, living, recreation, etc., writing a book called *Pleasant Diversions* in concise and lively words. As the name suggests, the book is filled with accounts of leisurely pursuits. Present readers can not only sense Li Yu’s genuine and endearing personality but also admire the lighthearted beauty he enjoyed through his harmonious integration with nature and art.

Pleasant Diversions is a famous work by Li Yu from the Qing Dynasty, ranked first among the “Eight Peculiar Masterpieces of Chinese Scholars”. The book consists of eight sections: the first three focus on opera theory, while the latter five cover topics such as music and dance, architecture and gardens, furniture and antiques, as well as food and health. It is acclaimed as an encyclopedia of ancient lifestyle arts, casting a great influence on later generations of literati. Li Yu included opera theory alongside various aspects of life in his writing, rather than treating the theory as a separate work,

demonstrating his belief that art is closely connected to daily life.

Among antiques, the incense burner is unique. It appears extremely still but the process of using it involves constant movements. Its position must be changed several times a day, and cannot always remain fixed. Among all the utensils, most can be kept still, but the incense burner inherently cannot. “Can one love it without exerting effort?” is the philosophy about how one should treat people, and so do I with the incense burner. — *Pleasant Diversions: Chapter of Utensils, Incense Burner*.

“Chapter of Utensils” mainly introduced the design of furniture, daily utensils, and indoor furnishings, playing a guiding role in the design of ancient Chinese interiors. The scale of indoor space is inseparable from the arrangement of utensils. The two are in a relationship of whole and part, opposition and unity.

“Among the necessary items for a household, only the house itself is immovable. The position of everything else is flexible and adaptable”. In the design of a study room, Li Yu emphasized the principle of “valuing flexibility and change”. While the house is immovable, the interior arrangement can be freely changed. The key to interior arrangement lies in frequently changing the position of objects to create visual freshness. Li Yu took the incense burner as an example: if the study room has windows on the north and south sides and the wind comes from the south, the incense burner should be placed directly south. If the wind comes from the north, it should be placed directly north. If the wind comes from the southeast or northwest, the placement should be adjusted accordingly. In short, the principle is to follow the direction of the wind.

Born with laziness, I always devise ways to avoid unnecessary effort. I once created a wooden stamp to press incense ash. A single press could replace the work of dozens of times shovelling. Initially, it was merely a way to save the effort of ash cleaning. Unexpectedly, once created, it not only saved labour but also appeared quite elegant. My friends started to use it as well, and it eventually became a widely accepted practice. Since the inception of incense burners, there was never been such a novel idea. The hermit on the lake (Liweng in Chinese pronunciation) symbolised elegance and refinement without any exaggeration. Thus, I would like to name this item “Liweng Incense Stamp”. — *Pleasant Diversions: Chapter of Utensils, Incense Implements*.

Shaping incense powder, also known as “incense pressing”, is a refined art within the practice of incense appreciation. Li Yu invented the “Liweng Incense Stamp”, not for shaping incense powder, but for tidying the incense ash, which reflected his little interest.

He designed a wooden stamp, which had to be customised to match the diameter of the incense burner. The size and shape perfectly matched the burner’s opening, and the inside of the stamp was carved with raised patterns. With this wooden stamp, a gentle press on the surface of the incense ash would make it flawlessly smooth, slightly dome-shaped, and adorned with imprinted patterns of flowers or poetry, adding an extra sense of elegance.

Li Yu was quite pleased with this small invention of his own, for which he named it “Liweng Incense Stamp”.

There is no better teapot for brewing tea than sand clay teapots and the finest of these come from Yixing, which everyone knows. However, treasuring them and valuing them as highly as gold and silver is something even Confucius would find excessive. We should use objects for their practical purpose rather than pursuing their obscure reputation. In making a teapot, the spout must be straight, and the same applies when purchasing one. A single curve can cause concern, and another curve renders it worthless. — *Pleasant Diversions: Chapter of Utensils, Teaware*.

Li Yu’s discussion on teaware and tea drinking emphasizes the unity of art and practicality. The best teapots are made from purple sand clay, and the finest teapots come from Yangxian (Yixing). Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, the art of purple sand teapot making has reached a high level, especially with the emergence of masters like Gong Chun, Shi Dabin, and Xu Youquan. Their contributions brought fresh innovation to the development of Zisha teapots, providing elegant enjoyment for the literati and scholars of the time. He also discussed the shape of the pots in detail and believed that the teapot should pursue practicality, the spout should be straight, the water should flow smoothly, and the disease of obstruction should be avoided.

For storing tea, it is best to use tin containers. Containers made of porcelain, copper, or other materials are not suitable, and even gold and silver are merely for display. Tin containers are preferred because they do not allow the aroma to escape. However, if poorly made, they are even less useful than porcelain containers. The lid of a tin container should be thick, not double-layered. For tea storage, if

the container is not frequently opened, it is necessary to place two or three layers of cotton paper inside the mouth of the container, seal it tightly, and let it dry before covering it with the lid. This method can prevent tea aroma from escaping. For containers that are frequently opened and closed, place one or two layers of paper inside the lid to keep the aroma sealed. This is the best strategy for storing tea. — *Pleasant Diversions: Chapter of Utensils, Teaware*.

Li Yu believed that tea should be stored in tin utensils to prevent the loss of tea aroma. The argument is clear and precise and also shows his understanding of the natural essence of tea. Tea easily absorbs odour. Once exposed to the air, it will absorb the smells of other things and its quality will change. Tin cans seal extremely well and are not prone to rust.

His works involve a lot of details of tea culture. For example, Li Yu's adaptation of *The Book of Pearls: Frying Tea* reflects the social customs of young men and women in the Jiangnan area at that time who bonded with tea.

2.3 Four Seasons of Health

Gao Lian, a playwright from the Ming Dynasty, grew up in Qiantang (present Hangzhou, Zhejiang). He was bored in the early years of the Jiajing period and lived mainly during the Wanli period. Gao was proficient in poetry and prose, passionate about books, tea, and medicine, and adept in health preservation. He authored the nineteen-volume *Eight Types of Notes on Cherishing Life*, which described methods of health preservation related to seasonal adjustments, daily life, disease prevention, diet, and elixirs, with detailed records on various foods. Gao Lian once served as an official in the Ministry of Rites in Beijing before retiring to the West Lake. There is no biography of him in *the History of Ming*. He was well-versed in music and arts of poetry, lyrics, antique appreciation, music, chess, calligraphy, painting, tea, wine, and culinary arts. Coming from a wealthy family, he lived in seclusion by the West Lake, enjoying the beauty of nature.

A guest asked Gao Lian, "All incense is merely for burning. Why complicate things with so many varieties?" Gao Lian replied, "The subtle pleasures of each incense are distinct. How can one apply the same approach to all? The refined appreciation of incense is not something you might understand. To truly grasp the essence of incense, one must discern its essence and subtleties, both in scent and in the experience it provides. This delicate and profound enjoyment is beyond the grasp of the unrefined."

Gao Lian's writings were similar to the connotation of incense, achieving the profound subtlety and refined elegance of a true master, reaching the same level of "incense's essence lies in tranquility".

In the *Eight Types of Notes on Cherishing Life*, a monograph on health preservation, Gao Lian dedicated significant attention to the topic of incense. The sixth volume, "Appreciation of Elegant Leisure" includes three sections: "On Incense", "Seven Essentials of Burning Incense", and "Incense Recipes". In the seventh volume, "Elixirs" he recorded a prescription for "Chenxiang Internal Supplement Pills". Gao Lian gathered eighty-one types of famous incense, discussed in detail incense burners, incense boxes, heat-diffusing sand plates, and other incense tools, and recorded more than ten formulas for various types of incense.

Among the springs of West Lake, Hupao Spring is the finest. Among the teas of the Two Mountains, Longjing is the best. Tea picked before the Guyu and quickly roasted, when brewed with Tiger Spring water, has a clear fragrance and a crisp taste that cools and refreshes the soul. Every spring, I should live in the mountains and savour the new tea for a month.

In Gao Lian's *Four Seasons of Pure Appreciation*, he lists 48 leisure activities that the people of ancient Hangzhou traditionally engaged in throughout the four seasons. These include trying new tea from the Hupao Spring in spring, drawing spring water to brew tea in autumn, and boiling spring water to make tea in winter, all reflecting an appreciation for subtle pleasures. Among the famous attractions of West Lake, Gao Lian especially favoured Longjing tea and Hupao Spring. Despite the fame of Longjing tea, its production area is fixed and its quantity is limited, making it highly prized.

In *Eight Types of Notes on Cherishing Life: Tea and Spring*, Gao Lian noted about the origin of Longjing tea: "The tea from Longjing in Hangzhou surpasses even the tea from the Heavenly Pool. There are only several tea producers in the mountains, and their roasting methods are exceptionally refined. Recently, the tea baked by a local monk has been particularly exquisite. The area of Longjing Mountain itself is only a few acres, and tea from elsewhere does not compare. There are many imitations in the vicinity, which are merely deceptive. Even among Hangzhou locals who know Longjing tea well, few can distinguish true Longjing tea from the many counterfeit varieties."

3. Ladies and Gentlemen

The charming phrase “red sleeves adding fragrance” in Chinese originates from the poem *Birthday Tribute to Master Jianzhai* by the Qing dynasty poetess Xi Peilan in her poetry *Changzhenge Collection*. The poem reads, “In green robes, she holds the inkstone to hasten the writing; in red sleeves, she adds fragrance to accompany the reading.” It represents the ideal life envisioned by scholars in ancient China.

3.1 The Insightful and Like-minded Lady

Mao Xiang was one of the “Four Greatest Gentlemen” of the late Ming dynasty. Dong Xiaowan, originally named Dong Bai, was a famous courtesan of the era. Xiaowan was intelligent, virtuous, and as graceful as an orchid. She fell into the world of prostitution but loathed the noisy and flashy lifestyle of the brothel. Her relationship with Mao Xiang exemplified the so-called “blessed couple” admired by the people of their time.

Xiaowan passed away at the age of 28, leaving Mao Xiang in profound sorrow. He wrote *Memories of Yingmei Temple* to reminisce about his life with Xiaowan, detailing her talents in poetry, music, incense making, and tea tasting. Mao Xiang’s deep love for Xiaowan is vividly depicted in his writings, expressing his sentiment that “All my life’s happiness was fully experienced and ended in those nine years”.

Xiaowan had a great capacity for drinking alcohol. After entering my family and seeing that I was not so good at drinking, she never drank and just served a few cups to my wife. Her love for tea matched mine, particularly for Jie tea. Every year, Guzi from Bantang sent the finest Jie tea leaves to us, which were characterized by the delicate texture of cicada wings. She always used the small pot with a gentle flame and light smoke, continuously added springs into the spot, and prepared for brewing tea. — *Memories of Yingmei Temple*

Both Dong Xiaowan and Maoxiang had a deep appreciation for Qian tea from the Jiangnan region. In the 22nd year of Kangxi, Maoxiang wrote an article titled “Jie Tea Compilation”. The opening line states “Among all types of tea, Jie tea is the finest”, reflecting his particular fondness for such tea.

Dong Xiaowan could drink wine. When Bold Xiang met her for the first time, Dong Xiaowan was just too drunk to wake up. Bold Xiang felt pity that she was tired, so he left. Additionally, when Dong Xiaowan came to Maoxiang Xiang’s Shuihui Painting Garden in Rugao, she knew that Mao Xiang was not a good drinker, so she gave up drinking alcohol and switched to tea.

We once carefully adjusted the burning ash by an inch, then steamed the incense over the ash with a layer of sand on the top. Throughout the night, the incense burned steadily, its fragrance concentrated and undispersed, neither burning too fast nor running out, filling the room with a rich, lingering sweetness, like the pure fragrance of the finest incense. There were hints of plum blossom, lotus, and pear honey, which were soothing to the nose. Over the years I remember this aroma and this scene, often waking up before dawn and sharing my spare melancholy with Xiaowan. We leaned on the incense basket, relieving the cold from the unlighted furnace. It felt like we were in a deep, fragrant place surrounded by numerous scents. When the fragrance disperses, I wish I could capture a bit of it to bring back to my quiet and secluded room. — *Memories of Yingmei Temple*

Dongguan in Guangzhou is the birthplace of “Guan Incense”, a type of fragrant wood, with “Maiden Incense” being the most precious. Mao Xiang once received a few pieces from a friend, which were the most cherished possessions of Xiaowan. She burned the incense through gauze, paying great attention to the atmosphere of enjoying the fragrance. Sometimes, on cold nights in a small room, with curtains hanging all around, she would light two or three red candles and burn a censer of agarwood in the Xuande incense burner, then quietly indulge in the olfactory experience, feeling as if she had entered the depths of floral fragrance.

The beauty of a stove lies in its colour. The false colour is showy on the outside, while the true colour is harmoniously integrated within. It emits a wondrous glow from its dull appearance, much like the delicate and tender skin of a fine lady that can be gently pinched. When the stove is heated for a long time, its colours become splendid and ever-changing. If it is not used for a long time, even if it is buried in the mud, it will return to its original state after being cleaned. A fake stove, even after being maintained for decades, will lose its lustre once the heat is gone. — *Notes on the Ode of Xuande Incense Burner*

For Maoxiang, a Xuande incense burner aroused his nostalgia for Dong Xiaowan and his longing for the Ming Dynasty.

When Mao Xiang saw the incense burner owned by Fang Gongqian, Xiang wrote a poem titled *Ode to the Xuande Incense Burner for Mr. Fang Tan'an*, and also composed *Notes on the Ode of Xuande Incense Burner* for this poem. It is said that during the Xuande era of the Ming Dynasty, 39,600 catties of windmill copper were tributed from the Siam (now Thailand), and a batch of high-quality bronze incense burners were cast using this material, which is the origin of the Xuande incense burners. By the end of the Ming Dynasty, there were even monographs introducing the Xuan incense burner, indicating its preciousness.

3.2 *The Lady Accompanying in the Fleeting Life*

Lin Yutang once said, “Yun is one of the loveliest women in Chinese literature.” *The Six Chapters of a Floating Life* is a book of essays with every word and sentence full of deep affection and friendship, recording the daily life of its author, Shen Fu, and his childhood sweetheart, wife, and cousin, Yun Niang.

The author pursued a refined lifestyle, where even the simple acts of drinking tea and burning incense are done with a certain grace and elegance. Despite a simple life of plain food and drink, they manage to make it tasteful and refined. Their love for each other was so deep that it cannot be described in words. The couple often composed poetry and travelled together. Shen Fu even specially engraved two seals, one red and one white, with the inscription “May we be husband and wife in every life”, to be used as a seal on their letters of communicating with each other.

Burning incense in a quiet room is a leisurely and elegant pleasure. Yun once used various types of incense, such as Chensu, and steamed them through a rice cooker until they were thoroughly infused. She would then set up a copper wire rack above the stove, about half an inch away from the fire, and slowly bake the incense, which would release a subtle and smokeless fragrance. Foshou should not be smelled when drunk, as it can easily rot. Mugua should not be touched by a sweated hand and it should be washed if so. Only Xiangyuan has no restrictions. There are also specific ways to use Foshou and Mugua, which cannot be fully expressed in writing. — *The Six Chapters of a Floating Life: Leisurely Sentiments*

While burning incense in a quiet room, Yuniang preferred to set up a small copper wire rack inside the incense burner, about half an inch above the surface of the ash, and place steamed pieces of incense, quick incense, and other natural spices on the rack. In this way, the incense pieces and the charcoal fire in the furnace were separated by a certain space. The impact of the fire was more gentle, and incense pieces would not be roasted to fry.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the custom of displaying fruits and enjoying their fragrances was particularly popular. Incenses were distinguished as either cold or warm. The scent of Foshou belongs to the category of “cold incense” akin to the subtle aroma of plum blossoms in the winter. Yunniang commented, “Foshou is the gentleman among incense, presenting subtle scents.”

In the summer months, when the lotus flowers first bloom, they close at night and open in the morning. Yun would take a small gauze pouch, fill it with a bit of lotus leaves, and place it at the heart of the flower. In the morning, she would remove it and brew it with spring water from the heavens, resulting in a taste that is exceptionally exquisite. — *The Six Chapters of a Floating Life*

Anything associated with lotus flowers acquires an elegant style. Placing tea leaves in the lotus flowers at dusk, one can take advantage of the lotus's habit of closing at night and opening in the morning, thus absorbing the fragrance overnight. This ingenious method of scenting tea with natural lotus buds is said to have originated from the private culinary collection of the Yuan Dynasty painter Ni Yunlin, titled *Yunlin Hall Dietary Regulations*.

It is precisely this elegant lifestyle that can turn a simple cup of tea into a comforting drink, no wonder the couple could remain content and at ease even in poverty.

4. Theatre Dreams and Life

4.1 Tang Xianzu

[Same as the previous tune] (The elderly woman and the clown, carrying a basket for picking tea, enter) Seizing the Grain Rain, we pick the fresh tea with a half-bud and a golden thread of sprouts. Ah, what officials are here? Scholars cook tea in the snow, and students brew tea in fatigue. The bamboo grove and new tiles seem tranquil and serene. [Voice over] The song is good. Speak to him, it's not the post-station scholar, nor the student from Yangxian, but the local lord encouraging agriculture. The scene of women picking mulberry and tea is better than that of picking flowers. A poem says, "Because there are fewer tea stars in the sky, the earth cultivates massive grass essences. The idle girls are greedy for fighting grass, which is not as attractive as fighting tea." Take the wine and wear flowers. (The elderly woman and the clown wear flowers and drink) [Together] The official is drunk with flowing clouds. Laughing before the wind and wearing flowers, the tea picker is handsome. [Exit] [The young and the middle-aged men kneel] Report, all the elders have tea and rice ready. [Voice over] No need. The remaining flowers and alcohol, elders take it, distribute it to the small villages, and also understand the intention of the official to encourage agriculture. Call the waiting to start the horse. [The young and the middle-aged men do not allow to detain guests] [Rise and call] The men and women in the village who have received the flowers and rewarded the wine, all come to send the master. — *Peony Pavilion: the Eighth Act, Encouraging Agriculture*

Tang Xianzu was the governor of Suichang, Zhejiang Province. Suichang is an important tea production area in China. He wrote a famous poem praising the local tea, titled *Tea Brewing in the Bamboo Isle*. The poem reads, "In front of the Junzi Mountain, I was sharing the midday rest. The damp mist and green bamboo play with the rosy clouds. I boiled water from Yufeng Peak, tasting the tea after the rain at Peach Creek." This poem is still widely recognised in the Suichang area.

Tang Xianzu's proficiency in tea affairs was extraordinary, beyond the reach of ordinary people. As the governor of a county, promoting tea cultivation was a major part of his annual rural outreach to encourage farming. In the eighth act of his fifty-five-act play *Peony Pavilion*, titled *Encouraging Agriculture*. In this act, Tang depicted the scene where the father of Du Linian, the prefect Du Bao, went to the countryside to encourage farming, with tea farmers picking, brewing, and fighting tea.

4.2 Cao Xueqin

Cao family, with Cao Xueqin's lineage spanning three generations and four individuals (Cao Zhenyuan, Cao Yin, Cao Yong, and Cao Feng), held the hereditary position of Jiangning Weaving for nearly 60 years. The family's experiences and legacies in the Jiangnan region provided rich material for Cao Xueqin's creative work. Among them, Cao Yin's *Lianting Book Catalogue* included 16 books related to tea affairs. Cao Xueqin was well-versed in the functions and values of tea, and he wrote about tea affairs many times in his novels. The entire *Dream of the Red Chamber* mentioned tea affairs in 273 instances, including tea names, tea sets, tea ceremonies, tea customs, tea water, tea snacks, and tea poetry, truly filling the pages with the tea culture.

Many plots of tea culture can be found in Chapter 41 of *Dream of the Red Chamber* with numerous details that capture the essence of tea appreciation. Miaoyu, a character in the novel, once said, "The first cup of tea is for savouring, the second is merely a vulgar means to quench thirst, and the third is the same as the way an ox or a mule drinks."

Tea enters the body through the mouth and is enjoyed by the body and mind. Incense enters the body through the nose, reaching the meridians and channels. Getting together, they complement each other, adding pleasures in life. This practice aligns with natural principles, nurtures the heart, and benefits physical health. It is the perfect harmony of the idiom "burning incense and sipping tea".

The Qing Dynasty's Zheng Banqiao depicted the ideal state of 'burning incense and sipping tea' that captured the ancients' imagination in the inscription of his painting. Even at present, the leisurely charm and subtle pleasures are still obvious:

"A thatched cottage, with a few new bamboo poles, and paper windows as white as snow, faintly soaked in green. With a cup of Yu-Chien tea, a Duan inkstone, and Xuan paper, I sit alone in such a place and draw a few strokes of broken-branch flowers. When friends arrive, the sound of the wind and the rustling of bamboo grows louder, but the tranquillity deepens. When my family servant sweeps the floor and the maid burns incense, I move around the bamboo grove. The clear light reflects on the

painting, which is utterly charming and lovable.”

Often, a tranquil and peaceful state of mind is not so hard to attain. It can be enhanced simply by the presence of incense and tea, creating a certain ambience. Occasionally, we can also, like the ancients, spend a short time in the busy world for leisure to slow down and enjoy the nourishment of a slower pace for the body and mind. Even if takes to light a stick of incense or brew a pot of tea, it is necessary to spend time comforting our souls.

5. Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the tea and incense culture among the literati of the Ming and Qing dynasties, emphasising the intricate relationship between these cultural practices and their broader philosophical and aesthetic values. Each chapter has contributed to a comprehensive understanding of these traditions, revealing their multifaceted roles in the lives of the educated elite.

In the first chapter, this study discusses the aesthetic and cultural aspects of tea culture during the Ming Dynasty in China, particularly focusing on the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism on tea culture. It explores the construction and design of tea spaces, the evolution of tea utensils, and the changes in tea drinking methods. The text also examines the development of specific tea-related practices and objects, such as the purple sand teapot and the concept of “washing tea”, highlighting the integration of practicality and artistry in Ming Dynasty tea culture.

The second chapter explores the phrase “red sleeves adding fragrance” highlighting its origins and idealistic meaning in ancient Chinese literature. It then delves into the lives of historical figures Mao Xiang and Dong Xiaowan, illustrating their refined lifestyle, deep relationship, and appreciation for tea and incense. Additionally, it examines Shen Fu and Yun Niang, emphasising their elegant and affectionate daily life, including their sophisticated methods of tea and incense preparation.

The third chapter discusses the significance of tea culture in the works of Tang Xianzu and Cao Xueqin. It highlights Tang Xianzu’s role in promoting tea cultivation in Suichang and his depiction of tea in his drama. It also examines Cao Xueqin’s incorporation of tea culture in his novel, showcasing his deep understanding of tea and its cultural importance. Both authors’ works reflect the profound connection between tea, life, and literature in their respective eras.

Today, tea drinking has gained worldwide popularity as a non-alcoholic beverage and a special cultural production. Incense, an essential element of daily life since ancient times, has also played a crucial role in the cultural essence of China. This study has highlighted the profound significance of tea and incense in the cultural and intellectual life of the Ming and Qing literati. These practices were not just for sensory pleasure but were deeply embedded in the philosophical and aesthetic values of the time. The findings underscore the lasting impact of these traditions on Chinese cultural heritage, reflecting an enduring reverence for beauty, tranquillity, and intellectual engagement. Through a detailed examination of historical texts, artefacts, and scholarly research, this paper has contributed to a richer understanding of the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of tea and incense culture in Ming and Qing China.

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